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A Global Company with a Global Past: VW's Historical Responsibility in Bolsonaro's Brazil

In Brazil, March 31 marks the anniversary of the beginning of the military dictatorship in 1964. The car company Volkswagen profited at the time from the dictatorship in its Brazilian factories. Today, VW has the opportunity to admit to its historical responsibility.

Geschrieben von [Antoine Acker](#) am 31. März 2019

Rio de Janeiro (October 5, 2018), seven months after the homicide of the feminist activist Marielle Franco, voice of the Black population, of the favelas, and of the LGBTQI in the local city council. According to the current status of police investigations, the main suspects for this crime are members of paramilitary circles with close connections to the family of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's new president. In honor of Marielle, her supporters hung up street signs with the name 'Rua Marielle Franco' immediately after her death.

On the picture to the right, one can see how two former candidates of Bolsonaro's party (PSL) destroy such a sign with pride. The man on the right side of the photo, who is raising his fist in elation is Wilson Witzel, a close collaborator of Bolsonaro and now the governor of the federal state Rio de Janeiro.

Witzel also appears in a second picture. Here, he recently staged a photograph next to the chairman of *Volkswagen Caminhões e Ônibus* (the local truck subsidiary of the Volkswagen Group) as economy-friendly head of government. Reactions in Germany leaned toward embarrassment, with the umbrella organization of Kritische Aktionärinnen und Aktionäre ("Critical Stockholders") [criticizing this meeting in a news report](#). After all, Witzel is – just like Bolsonaro – a politician who glorifies crime and a culture of violence, which in the European electoral landscape can only be compared with hardcore rightists groups like the Greek Golden

Dawn.

Yet, the CEO of VW in Latin America, Pablo Di Si, welcomed the radical-right election winners with surprisingly imprudent words already at the beginning of November. In the Argentinean press, he described Bolsonaro's election as [a chance for the economy and a motive for optimism](#). Does VW therefore sympathize with the human rights scorning government of Brazil? In view of the previously held stance of the local company representatives, one can at least speak of a misconceived political neutrality.

“Misconceived Political Neutrality”

“Misconceived Political Neutrality” is the term that the historian Christopher Kopper from the University of Bielefeld used to describe the position of the German VW management board in Wolfsburg during the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1984). In 2016, due to scathing accusations, VW charged him with settling potential violations by the Brazilian subsidiary company during the authoritarian period.

It came out that the factory security offices at the VW facility in São Bernardo do Campo near São Paulo had mistreated leftist workers, delivered them to the political police and therefore aided cases of torture and incarceration. [In addition, the car manufacturer owned a 140,000 ha cattle farm in the Amazon from 1973 to 1986](#), where it used Brazilian workers under brutal coercion for massive deforestation. Despite the latter being employed by local subcontractors, VW had been regularly informed about these incidents but chose not to intervene.

Forced labor is a term that evokes painful memories about a completely different historical context. Between 1939 and 1944, thousands of war prisoners, civilians particularly from Eastern Europe, as well as concentration camps detainees were exploited in the Wolfsburg Volkswagen factory for defense production. It was a first among German big business when VW ordered an independent historical study about its dark past in 1986.

Upon recommendation of historian Hans Mommsen, the company's management board provided a 12 million Deutschmark fund in 1991 to support cultural and social projects in the countries of origin of the former forced laborers. The publication of the resulting book *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich* (VW and its Workers in the Third Reich) in

1996 brought forth a series of initiatives for commemoration of the victims. Under the leadership of historian Manfred Grieger, who had co-authored the above book with Mommsen, the VW department for "Historical Communication" was founded in the following year, and its work became a benchmark for media and academia.

Obviously, everyone knew that there was also corporate interest behind the decision to accommodate the public desire for historical clarification. This confrontation with their own past gave VW the advantage in guarding itself against potentially damaging findings by a third party and resulting scandals. Furthermore, a culture of historical marketing emerged with the expansion of "Historical Communication," which became part of the car manufacturer's product promotion. In addition to publications such as the remarkable collection of reports from former Jewish forced laborers published in 2005, which unsparingly illustrated the crime committed in Wolfsburg, they also published books with glossy car images that recounted a classical narrative of post-war success. In this context, VW's rise as one of the largest multinational corporations was portrayed as a logical outcome of the German economic miracle of the post-war era. The political conditions, just like the social and ecological consequences of the period however, were hardly ever questioned.

VW in Brazil: Sluggish Review of the Past

VW only began to pay attention to its own history in Brazil, which the company long labeled "third world," when public pressure came from the country itself, having turned into an "emerged power." Already in the National Truth Commission (CNV), appointed by former President Dilma Rousseff to investigate the crimes committed under the military dictatorship, and completed in 2014, the suspicion emerged that VW had participated in the political persecution of union members during the dictatorship. [In the following year, twelve alleged victims came forward in the context of a class-action lawsuit carried jointly by unions and NGOs](#), which triggered an investigation of the car manufacturer by the Brazilian State Attorney.

These events prompted the "Historical Communication" to begin investigations on VW's role in the Brazilian military regime. With their preliminary archival visits, attempts to establish a (not always easy) dialogue with the concerned workers and the organization of a conference at the University of Göttingen, Grieger and his team started to seriously deal with the question of how to evaluate the behavior of a multinational company in authoritarian states. However, in the

midst of this process, the company parted from Grieger in October 2016. His review of a commissioned study concerning the subsidiary company Audi apparently triggered this decision. He had insinuated that, due to a lack of distance to the client, the study had failed in its objective to flawlessly analyze Audi's entanglement with the Nazi regime. Presumably, Grieger's philosophy of addressing even the most painful historical questions, which he practiced relentlessly over the years, had never fully settled in the company's mentality. [According to a report of the German public TV channel ARD from July 24, 2017, his research on Brazil also went too far for the board of management's taste.](#) The company's internal panic around the emissions scandal since Fall 2015 was not particularly helpful for an examination of the dark side of the company history.

Domestic and Foreign Expert Assessment

Grieger's dismissal upon request of the company management was followed by open protest from the community of historians in Germany as well as disappointed media and union reports in Brazil. In the context of these critical reactions, VW immediately thereafter asked historian Christopher Kopper to produce an independent assessment of the company's relation to Brazilian state repression.

Yet, did VW really care for clarifying its legal responsibility? Did the company want to know what exactly happened in its own factory? In that case, the company could have relied on the study of political scientist Guaracy Mingardi, who had been commissioned a few months earlier by the Brazilian State Attorney. [Pedro Machado, the responsible state attorney](#), said that he unsuccessfully invited VW to participate in the examination and to deliver internal company archives.

VW could have just the like supported Brazilian researchers, organized in work groups such as *Mais Verdade* in Rio de Janeiro or the IIEP (*Intercâmbio, Informações, Estudos e Pesquisas*) in São Paulo, who had been interested for a while in the review of the company's responsibility under the military regime. Overall, Brazil does not lack for highly competent historians on the history of the dictatorship. The conditions under which VW contracted the study therefore leave the impression that, in the eyes of the company management, only a German researcher guaranteed seriousness and objectivity, no matter whether or not they already possessed serious knowledge of Brazil's contemporary history, society and language.

For Kopper admitted to ARD journalists that he had to familiarize himself completely in the matter at first. When reading his final report, it becomes clear that he succeeded. At the same time, all historians are aware of how essential knowledge of language and context are for historical work. Despite assiduous research, Kopper did not include in his own report all of the documents from the political police and the Brazilian security agency analyzed and reproduced in Guaracy's final report.

VW was “Loyal Without Restrictions” vis-à-vis the Military Government

Despite these obstacles, Kopper handed a serious and objectively documented [126-page text](#) in Fall 2017, which (similar to the Mingardi report, handed in to the State Attorney shortly before) was able to confirm most of the suspicions against the company: The subsidiary VW do Brasil assessed the military coup of 1964 in a positive manner and “behaved loyal without restrictions towards the military government.” Between 1969 and 1979, a “cooperation between factory security offices and the political police of the regime” took place, and such “with the consented knowledge of the management.” The factory security offices facilitated the detention of factory employees at a time when the use of torture was “already known to the German and Brazilian public.” In addition, workers were monitored and politically motivated “black lists” created and exchanged with other companies in order to prevent the employment of individuals perceived as subversive throughout the entire auto industry. Concerning the exploitation of rural workers on its Amazon farm, Kopper speaks of the company's “indirect responsibility.”

On the occasion of the publication of the “Kopper study,” the plaintiff victims were invited to a public event in São Bernardo do Campo on December 14, 2017. They did not receive any information concerning the program of the event and therefore the plaintiff workers decided to demonstrate in front of the factory gates rather than posing for handshakes with company representatives: Their banners read “We don't want a party, we want justice.”

In the factory's conference room, VW used the publication of the Kopper report as a reason to celebrate the multinational company as history-conscious. However on this occasion an ambivalent message was conveyed, which sounded rather like a denial of their own historical

responsibility. Despite prior efforts by corporate management to keep the historical research in German hands, no German manager was present; as if the matter suddenly had turned into an exclusively local problem.

The company's spokesperson Pablo Di Si attributed the abuses listed in the report to "individual offenders," expressed "remorse" in the name of his company without enunciating the expected "apology," and unveiled a commemorative plaque in the honor of the "victims of the dictatorship," which excluded any reference to VW and the workers abused by its factory security offices.

Responsibility in the Present

The remainder of the report's demands went by the board. Kopper was too unknown in Brazil as to turn his recommendation, uttered on German TV – that the company should apologize to its victims and indemnify them – into a public demand within Brazilian society. With the success of Bolsonaro's right-wing election campaign in 2018 and the takeover by those nostalgic of the dictatorship, who despise the work of the National Truth Commission as well as the memory of the victims of the military regime, his report practically fell into oblivion.

Politically, the former army officer Bolsonaro stems from the extreme right fringe of the military regime he adores, though which he reproaches for [not having killed enough opposition members](#). Within the course of the last three decades, he openly defended fascist values and practices including torture, mass murder and political confinement. Despite rapidly shrinking popularity within his own country and catastrophic diplomatic appearance, his government hopes to gain the support of global players on an international scale thanks to its utterly neoliberal economic policy. How VW will deal with the question of historical responsibility in this context and as Brazil's most important car manufacturer must be seriously observed. At the moment, negotiations are taking place with the plaintiff workers, in which the company only engaged under threat of a court case.

If VW admitted to a reconciling approach to the reassessment of its past and engage in politics of material and symbolic reparation on the victims' side, a historic step would be taken. With it, the car company could stimulate a past overdue reassessment of the military dictatorship, which Brazil sorely needs in today's context: For March 31, Bolsonaro has ordered official festi-

vities for the 55th anniversary of the military dictatorship. If however, VW sweeps the matter under the carpet and continues to treat Bolsonaro's government like a normal interlocutor, this would be not only disastrous for democracy in Brazil, it would also demonstrate that VW has learned very little from its three decades of Culture of Remembrance in Germany.

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